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ABSTRACT

Language learners want to communicate with others about the sort of things that interest them. Nearly everybody is interested in playing games. Many language games are kept going by communication and break down if communication itself does so. Four types of game are described to illustrate this point: guessing games, certain number games, games affording practice of the use of a piece of syntax, and "Alibi." In such games the language learners are eager to communicate with one another. Not all useful language games are of this kind, nor is communicative practice obtainable in this way only. Some games appeal to adults, others to children. Adults prefer to see the linguistic point of a game. In a foreign language learning situation, communicative games can play a very important role, but even in a second language learning situation (in which the language is met with in daily life outside the school) they can be valuable. (Author)

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Communicating in English: the Value of Certain Language-Games [1]

W. R. Lee

In this article the learning situation I have chiefly in mind is that of the foreign-language learner who does not meet much with the language outside the school where he or she is learning it. There is thus little or no opportunity of using the language or even of hearing it being used except in the lessons themselves. In this type of learning situation I will concentrate on children but make some reference to adults. However, adults are better at seeking out and finding the language in use elsewhere; for instance, on the radio, in foreign-language clubs, by going abroad, and so on.

To a lesser extent, I have a different type of language-learning situation in mind: that in which the language being learnt, although not the learner's native language, is met with outside the school. This is the situation in which immigrants find themselves. Many of them cannot avoid the new language in their daily lives, and all of them can without difficulty find it in use if they want to.

Now you cannot learn to communicate in a language unless you have others to communicate with, and if you cannot find them outside the school or class, in daily life, you have to find them inside.

What can language-learners communicate about? One should rather ask: What do they want to communicate about? Because if they cannot use the new language to say things they want to say, read things they want to read, and so on, there will not be much motive force behind their attempts at learning, and the teacher may be dragging them along unwillingly behind his pedagogical chariot.

They want of course to communicate with others about all sorts of things that interest them, but if they speak the same language it seems most natural to communicate in that. It is easiest with a multilingual class, because English can then be a lingua franca.

The subject-matter of a foreign-language course, at any level, needs to be based on the learners' interests, and of course these will vary from age-level to age-level, place to place, one social environment to another, and so on. Nearly everybody, however, is interested in games. Where these have been introduced to the learners, it seems natural enough to play them in the foreign language. When the game is interesting, the main thing is to keep it going. Communication takes place as a means of sustaining the game: in a sense communication is incidental to it.

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1) A modified version of a talk given at the FIPLV Congress held in Washington DC in November 1975.

Four types of language-games can be taken as illustrating this point:

1) The guessing-game, which has many varieties;
2) Number games, especially those whose main purpose is to familiarise learners with the spoken forms of numbers;
3) Games affording communicative practice of a single point of syntax, but where the main focus of attention is not on the syntactic point; and
4) Alibi, a comparatively elaborate game in which the focus throughout is on the subject-matter, but in which the vehicle of communication includes a fairly narrow range of syntax.

Guessing-games are popular with all sorts and ages of people, as radio programmes demonstrate, and they can come into an elementary course for children at a very early point. Somebody thinks of something and the others guess: It's a bag, an apple, a star, a boat, and so on - whatever things they have been learning the names of. Or, of course, Is it a bag, an apple? etc. This game-practice can last only a few minutes while the learners' vocabulary remains small, but later it can be elaborated to cater for a growing command of the language - It's a brown bag, a large green apple, your father's boat, and so on. The numerous varieties of this game include Who is it? (Is it me?, Is it Ann?, Is it Mr Jones? etc.), Where is it? (It's behind those books, in her shoe, on top of the cupboard, etc.), Where can it be? (You may have left it at home, dropped it in the bus, lent it to somebody, etc, or Could you have left it at home? etc.), Where am I going to put it? (a small object - and prepositional phrases again), and What's he going to do? (He's going to run round the room. Are you? No, I'm not - etc.).

These are but a few of the possible varieties[1], and most of these guessing-games are played within a narrow range of syntax. The learners are not simply repeating imitatively (which is necessary now and then) or doing pattern drills (also to be given a place). When they guess, for instance, You're going to draw a cow, they are offering a suggestion, which the pupil who knows what he or she has decided to do compares with the decision and accepts or rejects accordingly. This is communicative activity. Moreover, communication is necessary to keep the game going - the suggestion needs to be understood and the reply also understood. The game is to know the solution to the mystery. Mysteries (even minor ones) engender most people's interest, and especially children's.

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[1] They are described more fully, along with many other games, in the author's Language-Teaching Games and Contests (O.U.P.)

Very different are number games.

For children, the most exciting one I know (it never fails) begins with the writing of numbers in a cluster on the chalkboard. They can be any numbers of which the pupils do not quickly recognise the spoken forms in the foreign language. Then two or three pupils come out, one from each team, and face the board, each being armed with a piece of coloured chalk. The teacher, or one of the other pupils, says one of the numbers and the three players try to draw a ring round it. The first to do so scores a team point. Then another of the numbers is called, and so on. Those out at theboard should be frequently replaced, so that other members of their teams get a turn.

It is surprising what excitement this game can arouse. Far from sitting apathetically in their places, the rest of the class try to join in, especially if their team representative is slow in spotting the number. They should be free to call out appropriately in English (if that is the foreign language being used), e.g. 'On the left', 'In the middle', 'At the top/bottom' etc.

This is communication in the ordinary everyday sense of the term. The spoken number has to be understood and its visual form found. The game is best kept going, and most points scored, where the communication is quick. (Sums of money, weights and measures, etc. could also be used.)

Another children's game which helps to develop quick recognition of spoken numbers is 'Numbers Change'. Once understood, it is very suitable as a group activity. The players sit or stand in a circle and number off: 'I'm number 1, Bill', 'I'm number 2, Jane', and so on. There is a player in the middle of the circle who calls out any two of the numbers, e.g. '4' and '7'. Those whose numbers are called must then quickly change places, while the player in the middle tries to occupy one of the places they leave. Again, quick communication is essential to the maintenance of the game.

Some games afford communicative practice of a single point of syntax, while keeping the learners' attention focussed on the subject-matter rather than on linguistic forms. (This applies to a large extent to the guessing-games, of course.) Here are two examples of what one might call communicative syntax-games, the first based linguistically on the must/need/needn't block of language, and the second on one of the uses of the present perfect.

The must/need/needn't game (which is less a game than a game-like activity, although teams can challenge one another to bring in an element of contest) calls for a good, simple map-diagram, clearly visible to the whole class, of a small town (or part of it). Then a series of problems can be tackled.

E.g. How do you get from the station to the main post office? You go along Victoria Road, take the first on the right, etc.etc. Must you take the first on the right? Yes, you must, but you needn't take the second on the left: you can take the first on the left and then the second on the right, etc. How do you get from the Town Hall to the football ground? The swimming-bath to the bus station? The Red Lion to the hospital? And so on.

Again, here is real communication, and it is basic to the procedure. Whether or not the learners are immigrants, hearing and seeing the language all around them, does not matter: the map can be of the town in which the pupils live, or perhaps of a town in a story they have been reading. But what matters above all is the temperature of interest, and what suits some learners does not suit others. Uninteresting communication will not keep the language-lessons alive: interest comes first, and communication (though its value is great, and these 'games' cannot be kept going without it) must come second. But interest is difficult to sustain where there is no communication.

The Present Perfect game (which involves only one of the uses of this English tense) might also be called What has happened? It is suitable for children or young people. Pupils go outside, change something in their appearance, and return: the change should not be too obvious. Team points are scored for correct observations, such as Eileen has taken off her brooch, Jim has combed his hair, Derek has undone one of his shoelaces, Sandra has changed her glasses. Such remarks may also take the form of questions, e.g. Have you taken off your brooch? (the questioner is not sure whether she had one), or Haven't you taken off your brooch? (the questioner is fairly sure that she has). Incorrect statements may of course precede the correct one.

Here English is being used to communicate something the language-learners want to say they have noticed. The focus of attention is on what has happened rather than on the tense form.

Finally, the game called Alibi, which is so well known that a brief description will suffice. Two 'suspects', who should be fairly good at the foreign language, are thought to have committed a crime: let's say they have broken into a shop. They deny it and say they have an alibi. They leave the room and make up together a detailed story to account for their movements on the evening of the crime. While they are doing this the teacher rehearses with the others the sort of questions which they, as 'interrogators', can ask the two 'suspects' when they re-enter the room, e.g. Where did you meet? When? What was the weather like? What were you wearing? Where did you go first? How long did you spend there? Everybody should have at least two questions to ask. Then the 'suspects' come in separately, and are questioned in turn. Contradictions in their stories soon emerge, and re-questioning brings out all the discrepancies, thus destroying their alibi.

Now this may all fall flat if the 'suspects' have agreed, for instance, that they went home and looked at television the whole evening. The remedy is to give them an 'outline' first: for instance, that they visited at least three different places in the town.

The syntax brought into action during this meaningful game will include one kind of use of the simple past and the past continuous, reported speech (You said that... but he said that...), possibly the pre-perfect, and clauses beginning with while. It takes perhaps a whole lesson-period to play, and doubtless it has little to do with 'real life'(whatever that may be). But it offers a fine opportunity at intermediate or advanced level (particularly for those whose foreign-language interest is not concentrated on a defined vocation), to use the language communicatively. They want to do so because the problem to be solved is an interesting one - interesting enough to take their thoughts in some measure off the means of expressing them.

This is not to suggest that at other times the means should not be closely attended to. There are games which have language--teaching value though they do not provide communicative practice, and there are of course still other ways of providing such practice in the language-lesson.

Will adults play language-games? They will and do, but naturally there are games which appeal only to children. Adults prefer, anyway, to see the linguistic point of the game, which young children do not need to see and may not be capable of seeing.

If the second language being learnt at school is seen and heard in daily life outside it, as it is by immigrant learners, then there is plenty to talk about and plenty they will want and need to talk about, and systematic language-instruction can be largely based on these wants and needs. This is certainly not to say that there is no place for language-games, as a means of bringing more variety and liveliness into the language learning. Where the language is a truly foreign language, however, and is rarely heard in the everyday community, language--games can play a very important role indeed - and most especially where the learners have as yet no definite idea of why and how they will need or wish to use the language in their post-school lives - as a means of providing experience of communicating something the learners wish to communicate. Games should take their place as a central element in the teaching-learning process alongside a variety of other forms of language-learning activity.

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